

Advent 1 Year B 2014 with Testimony 1030

Sir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection awaken us to the threatening dangers of our sins, and keep us blameless until the coming of our new day, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen

Advent: A time of questioning, a time of reconciling one's suffering, a time of waiting, and a time of expectation.

Today we mark the occasion with the lighting of the first Advent candle. We will continue to light candles week after week in anticipation of the day we will gather to light the center candle, the white one, in celebration of the arrival of the Christ child, Jesus.

Today is also St. Aidan's "Real Lives" service, an opportunity to highlight the ways God has and continues to work in a person's life, in an effort to share with one another God's amazing grace / and / God's ability to transform even the most wretched of souls into a disciple of His son. Of course, I can only speak to my own wretchedness, and that's what Pastor Dave (I really rather call him Father, truth be known) has asked me to do.

I would like to do it however within the context of God's greater story.

Advent – the Prologue

But first, a word about expectations: Many say, keep them low, then you will never be really disappointed. Others say if you don't set high expectations, you will never achieve what God has in store for you. I can say this. Whatever it is you are expecting, prepare for it not turn out exactly as you planned.

I was reminded of this recently, in a story I heard of this woman who had a real heart for ministry. She is the type who would go out of her way to help anybody and was known for giving people odd jobs around her house even if she didn't need work to be done.

One day, she answered the knock at her door to find an obviously destitute man who heard of her generosity and wished to earn some money by doing some odd job. As usual, she was touched by his need and asked him whether he could paint or not.

He said, "Sure, I am a pretty good painter."

The lady said, "Great." "Here's a gallon of green paint and a brush. Go around the house and you'll see a **porch** that needs repainting. When you're done, I'll look it over and pay you what its worth." "It wasn't more than an hour when the man returned and reported he was all finished.

She asked him, "Did you do a good job?"

The man of course said, "Yes. But went on to say "Lady, there's one thing I'd like to point out to you. That's not a **Porsche** back there. That' a Mercedes."

Isn't it the truth? We expect and hope the things of life to turn out in certain ways. But how often does it happen exactly as we planned? Isn't it also true, that when we really want something, and it seems to take forever to come to pass, / we get really frustrated?

Waiting

The prophet Isaiah and the Psalmist provide great illustrations of this (both from a community and an individual's point of view). Each pleaded desperately for God to deliver them from their despair, and when it didn't happen in a timely manner, nor in the way they had envisioned, they became incredibly frustrated.

But, can you blame them, or the people of Israel for being tired of waiting? I mean, having returned from exile in Babylon, was it not a reasonable expectation that the city of Jerusalem would have been rebuilt, and that the people of God would have been renewed? / Instead of course, what they continued to be faced with was ruin, conflict, and famine. Naturally, they didn't understand why the God who had delivered them in the past had not restored them as they had envisioned.

Isaiah's response to their plight, typical of the Hebrew testament (and my mother), is that their hardship must have been caused by something/ they / kept on doing wrong. In other words they were being punished for not having fully repented. That message certainly resonated with the people at the time. Today however, I am pretty convinced that waiting is not a punishment.

Look, / waiting can be irritating. In fact, some people look at the season of Advent that way. It is an irritating time we have to pass through in order to get to Christmas. Kind of like waiting in a doctor's office for a flu shot when the doctor is running hours behind schedule. The flip side to waiting however is that it does provide us the space to pause /and to reflect /on where God is in our lives.

For some however, too much waiting and reflection leads them into a "a dark place," even to the point of fearing whether God is there for them / or whether God would save them, if they truly needed Him. In that sense, Advent is kind of like waiting in a doctor's lobby with a potentially fatal case of pneumonia and not knowing for sure whether there is even a doctor in the office that is going be able to see you.

The communal lament in Isaiah 63and 64 is kind of like that. It is riddled with real existential questions in which the worshiping community tries to first locate God (63.11), / then wonders if God is able to save them (63.15), / and then finally ends with them questioning whether they themselves are even worth saving. (64.12)."¹

This doubt, this frustration with waiting, normal as it may be, needs to be weighed against the fact that throughout scripture, "waiting is almost always preceded by something holy, breathtaking, and beyond human expectations." In Scripture, waiting is meant to build "anticipation for something extraordinary to happen." In other words, waiting seems to be used by God to say "PAY ATTENTION everyone, I am about to do something big!

¹ Preaching the RCL, Year B, 20.

Often, our waiting pays off, particularly when we finally decide to reach out to God and take the risk of faith. Isaiah got to that point and finally asked, “Lord, how can I be saved?” It was kind of like that for me.

TESTIMONY

- Growing Up Jewish – didn’t know difference between Jesus and the Easter Bunny
- Ukrainian Catholics – Easter and Xmas – Hanukkah and Passover
- Didn’t “hate” Christians, but thought if not a Jew, you must be a Christian. A real sense of fear. Fear of Christians and Christian symbols
- After bar-mitzvah/confirmation.... Drugs and alcohol
- Returned to the fold through community – camps and youth groups
- Joined the Army – experienced anti-Semitism
- More involvement in Jewish community, local and national student leader during the gulf war, ambassador at folklorama at the Israeli pavilion, member of the chevra kaddisha.
- Went to Israel for first time, and encountered God for the first time at the Western wall, experienced the Shekinah.
- Returned a second time, this time longer, to study at a yeshiva, Ohr Somayach – join the IDF
- Returned to Canada – story of my life, met a Christian girl.
- Wanted to learn but was rejected because of my Jewishness.

- Life fell apart. Relations with friends, family, girlfriend fell a part. Life in an ongoing cycle ending in a downward spiral.
- Taking a class on Antisemitism at the UofM. Paper on is the New Testament Anti-Semitic? Conclusion. Anti-Judaic not anti-Semitic.....
- Said a prayer.... God, I think you are full of it, but (televangelist)
- Had a dream... cloth ripped in two... image of Jesus
- Didn't become a Christian overnight. Various Christian friends, mentors, and professors. Inevitably led to the Anglican Church. Had no intention of getting baptized. Went to Murray here at St. Aidan's about getting married. He challenged me and asked... "Do I believe this or not," I said, I guess I do.
- 1995/96 baptized, April confirmed here at St. Aidan's, married Sept 1st, three days later off to Wycliffe, (to be a social worker?), three years later after that I was ordained in the church of God.

There is so much more I can say about my own testimony / from the time leading up to my conversion, / to my time here at St. Aidan's, / to my time at Wycliffe, early ordained years, and as a military chaplain. What is clear is that God was and remains present even when I doubt. One thing that stands out though are the people God has brought into my life (my wife, her family, mentors, and countless friends). I don't know if I ever publically thanked them, and they will probably kill me for doing so, but back in the day, as poor starving students, Jan and Laird Jones came to me and Sherry and said they wanted to support us, both in prayer and financially. I share this not to embarrass them, but to thank them, / because they, like so many other people of faith here at St. Aidan's /

saw the way God was working in one person's life, my life, / and thought enough of God and e to step out in faith to help someone they didn't even really know all that well. Their generosity has never left me and has taught me much through time.

Questioning God and having Expectations

If I could return though to the idea of questioning God and having expectations, my experience and reading of scripture tells me that it is a pretty normal part of the journey. In fact, Advent is a particular time in the church year that is set aside to do just that.

In Advent we hope and expect that God will come and that God will return. For those who suffer and wait, this revelation and prophecy is meant to instill hope rather than anxiety.

Are you hopeful? Or are you still anxious? I suspect many of us are to some extent anxious, otherwise we wouldn't spend so much time trying to figure out when Jesus is coming back rather than focusing on the fact THAT Jesus is coming back.

To be fair, we shouldn't blame ourselves too much for wondering when God is going to show up again. At once, scripture tells us God walked the earth, provided clear instructions and direction to both people and nations, and when they got off track or disobeyed, God seemed to react pretty quickly

Generations' later, upon return from exile and continued desperation, the Hebrew prophets thought God was far from them, off in the distance, and begged God or one of His angels to come down to them and to save them from their strife.

We are not all that different today. I mean, who hasn't cried, "God, where are you, when are you going to send someone to save me?" Even Mark's gospel, at first glance, seems to suggest the same thing. However, there is a big difference. Mark's gospel is different in that Mark is clear that it's not just anyone who is going to come on behalf of God, but that God himself is coming.

Writing not too far after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem – a time of turmoil and fear, Mark uses the term "son of Man" to describe Jesus. In the Hebrew Testament, this term typically referred to an "eschatological" or end of time judge who would save the righteous and destroy all doers of evil. The difference is that "Son of Man," was not merely a messenger of God (as thought of in the Hebrew Scripture), but God himself. It is Jesus, the Son of Man, and the Son of God who "comes on clouds," "sends out angels," and "gathers the elect," initiating the beginning of the end times.

The wait is worth it

My friends, God is coming back!

When, we don't know. In the meantime, we have to wait. But try to remember that the wait is worth it.

Whatever you need restoration in, take these next couple of weeks to focus on the hope of your restoration use the season of Advent to take the time to question and call out to God.

Also be encouraged. Paul reminded the Christians in Corinth who were also awaiting the advent of Jesus, to take heart in the spiritual gifts God had left them. In the same manner, we must take heart in the spiritual gifts God has left us, knowing that these gifts are the strength and encouragement we need to make it through until the time when our suffering and pain will end.

Truth be told, God answered the prayers of Isaiah. God answered Isaiah's cry to "tear open the heavens and come down," and to make God's name known by "awesome deeds that we (that no one ever) expected."

To get the complete picture of this, read the whole Gospel of Mark through Advent. It's only 16 short chapters long. There, you will see the surprising way God has responded.

At his baptism, Jesus sees the curtain of the heavens torn open and hears himself declared the "son of God." Then upon Jesus' death, the curtain in the sanctuary of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, showing us that at Jesus' death, the barrier between God and humanity was split in two, opening our way to God directly through Christ.

In between these two awesome events, the first a declaration of the Son's commencement of his ministry, the last, a declaration of the fulfillment of God's promise, Jesus' presence in this world was nearly unseen. His arrival, though miraculous was less than spectacular. There were no trumpets, no thunder, no lightening, rather he entered this world in the darkness of a stable. He then left this world abandoned on a cross.

Ponder this while you wait and while you question. Where is God in your life? Where has he joined with you? , where has he cried with? And where has he died with you?

Take this time afforded all of us in Advent to prepare yourself for restoration. And if it helps, say this prayer a couple times,

Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

As we await our restoration, we pray you return to us O God Almighty, Look down from heaven and see – revive us, and we will call on your name. Amen.